

Citation for published version:

Newth, G 2019, 'The roots of the Lega Nord's populist regionalism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 384-406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1615784>

DOI:

[10.1080/0031322X.2019.1615784](https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1615784)

Publication date:

2019

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Patterns of Prejudice* on 26th July 2019, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1615784>

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Patterns of Prejudice, Manuscript Resubmission

Title Page

The roots of the Lega Nord's populist regionalism

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There is no potential conflict of interest in this article.

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Word Count:

7892

The roots of the Lega Nord's populist regionalism

ABSTRACT This paper contributes to a greater understanding of the connection between regionalism and radical right ideology by examining the roots of the Italian Lega Nord's regionalist, populist and nativist discourse with a new framework of 'Populist Regionalism'. By analysing the discourse of two waves of regionalist activism in Lombardy and Piedmont, represented respectively by Movements for Regional Autonomy (MRAs) and the Lega Nord (Northern League), the paper underlines a significant connection between populist regionalism and the radical right represented by the process of othering used against both internal and external migrants. At the same time, examination of narratives used by these two waves of activism reveals differences – at times nuanced, at times more explicit – between their respective populist and nativist identities.

KEYWORDS Regionalism, Populism, Nativism, Lega Nord, Radical Right, Padania, First Italian Republic, Second Italian Republic, Immigration.

Introduction

This paper contributes to a greater understanding of the connection between regionalism and radical right ideology by examining the roots of the Italian Lega Nord's (Lega's) regionalist, populist and nativist discourse. This study considers the Lega's process of 'othering' as part of a longer history of North Italian regionalism with roots in the 1950s,

While most studies take the starting point of the Lega as the late 1970s or early 1980s, this research, instead, builds upon previous work on this party in which it was argued that it was the protagonist of a second wave of a North Italian regionalist activism.¹ The paper introduces a new framework of 'Populist Regionalism' which enables a cross-analysis of two Movements for Regional Autonomy (MRAs), il Movimento per l'Autonomia Regionale Piemontese (the MARP) and il Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco (the MAB) and the Lega.

Many thanks to Aurelien Mondon for his invaluable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, particularly regarding the theoretical section and the concluding paragraphs. I also wish to thank Anna Cento Bull for her meticulous and insightful feedback on the section of my PhD research on which this article is based.

¹ George Newth, 'The Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco and the Lega Nord: continuities and discontinuities', *Modern Italy*, vol.23, no.3, 2018, 235-253.

This allows for an examination of how the MRAs influenced the Lega's ideology. While the paper establishes important connections between the exclusionary discourse of the two waves of activism, it also identifies important differences between the populist regionalism due to two inter-linked factors. First, while the MRAs were a product of the First Italian Republic and operated within its parameters, the Lega was a benefactor of and contributed to its downfall and, thus, contributed to the emergence of the Second Italian Republic. Second, due to this differing context, each wave of activism belonged to a different wave of populism. The populism represented by both the MRAs and the Lega formed part of trends which went beyond the Italian case; however, the rise of the Lega can be linked to a much more significant rise of European and global populism in the 1980s and 1990s.

This paper employs a methodology of comparative analysis of the content and tone of the materials released by both the MARP and the MAB and also the leagues from both Lombardy and Piedmont. Further to existing literature on the Lega, the sources cited in this article range from primary material obtained from archival research in Turin, Milan and Bergamo, secondary sources written by protagonists of both waves of activism.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section establishes a populist regionalist framework which forms the basis of discourse analysis. The second section traces a brief history of the MRAs and the Lega in the context of two waves of populism. The main part of the paper in the third section analyses in some detail three aspects of continuity and discontinuity between the two waves of Populist Regionalism. The final section draws conclusions by reflecting on how narratives of social exclusion evolved from 1950s' populist regionalism.

Populist Regionalism

In this paper, it is argued that the key elements of populist regionalism are regionalism, populism and nativism.

In the Italian general election of March 2018, Matteo Salvini's Lega received the highest number of votes since its formation in 1991 and subsequently formed a government with the Five Star Movement.² Populism and nativism were present in Salvini's successful electoral campaign, as seen in his promise to 'return sovereignty to "the people" from the

² The Post Internazionale, 'Risultati elezioni 2018: chi ha vinto' *TPI News*, 6 June 2018, available at www.tpi.it/2018/03/07/risultati-elezioni-politiche-2018-chi-ha-vinto, (viewed 12 June 2018).

“poteri forti” (powers that be) in Brussels’, and slogan of ‘Italians first.’³ Regionalism, however, was abandoned by Salvini in favour of fighting for Italian sovereignty.

In removing the iconic words ‘Nord’ and ‘Padania’ (the latter of which had since 1995 represented the Lega’s imaginary northern state) from his party’s symbols in 2017, Salvini ended the second of two waves of North Italian regionalist activism.⁴ To a certain extent, Salvini’s decision represents a logical step in the wake of previous attempts to transform the Lega into a national party. These include the attempted establishment of the ‘Lega Centro’ and the ‘Lega Sud’ to complement the Lega Nord in the early 1990s and the brief rebranding of the party as the ‘Lega Nord - Italia Federale’ in the mid-1990s.⁵ Further to this, the Lega in the 2000s also ‘stressed the need for a common Christian identity’ and ‘extending this identity to all Italians’ portrayed itself as protector of what it argued were traditional Catholic Italian values in the face of foreign migration.⁶ However, up until 2017, the Lega was able to ‘turn on and off its claims for an independent Padania in line with political context’.⁷ This is evident from articles in the Lega’s mouthpiece, *La Padania*, which in the months leading up to Bossi’s resignation suggest a revival of a separatist strategy. Salvini himself also initially rededicated the movement to Padanian independence to consolidate support from grassroots members before adopting a stance in favour of defending Italian national sovereignty.⁸ Therefore, whereas the Lega had always maintained the possibility to revert back to secessionism, Salvini’s rebranding of the Lega represents a much more radical and decisive move.

While this paper does not systematically engage with Salvini’s rebranded ‘post-regionalist’ Lega due to this disappearance of the common denominator of regionalism, Salvini’s populism and nativism have significant roots in the two waves of regionalist activism which preceded him.

³ Matteo Salvini, ‘Popolo contro poteri forti, così riparte l’Italia’, *YouTube*, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HJWvO8mlTo (viewed 12 June 2018).

Valentina Avon, ‘Salvini, nei manifesti lo slogan “Prima gli Italiani.” Ma nelle foto ci sono cechi e slovacchi’, *La Repubblica.it*, 21 February 2018, available at http://www.repubblica.it/speciali/politica/elezioni2018/2018/02/21/news/salvini_nei_manifesti_lo_slogan_prima_gli_italiani_ma_nelle_foto_ci_sono_cechi_e_slovacchi-189407595/ (viewed 12 June 2018).

⁴ Fabio Poletti, ‘Salvini cancella il Nord e la Padania dal simbolo’, *La Stampa*, 22nd December 2017.

⁵ Damian Tambini, *Nationalism in Italian politics: The stories of the Northern League 1980-2000*, (London: Routledge Advances in European Politics 2001), 57-58.

⁶ Eva Garau, ‘National Identity and Immigration: The Case of Italy’, PhD Thesis, University of Bath, 2010, 180-181.

⁷ John Foot, *The Archipelago, Italy since 1945* (London, Bloomsbury, 2018), 390.

⁸ Stefania Piazzo, ‘Padania Indipendente. Bossi suona la carica’, *La Padania*, 11 January 2012.

Matteo Salvini, ‘Lega: Salvini, non ci fermiamo fino all’indipendenza’ 15 December. available at <http://www.leganord.org/notizie2/11657-lega-salvininon-ci-fermiamo-fino-all-indipendenza>, (viewed 19 May 2018).

My Populist Regionalist framework extends and challenges frameworks constructed by Albertazzi and McDonnell on ‘regionalist populism’ and by Mudde on the ‘Populist Radical Right.’⁹ Albertazzi and McDonnell, correctly argue that ‘it is impossible to understand and explain the Lega from its foundation to the present day without explicitly highlighting the party’s regionalist character’, following Biorcio’s definition of the Lega as ‘Regionalist Populist’.¹⁰ The Lega offered a ‘blend of regionalism and populism’ using ‘a framework of interpretation in which a positively evaluated *us* or *the people* – honest, hard-working and simple-living northern Italians attached to their local traditions - are juxtaposed against *poteri forti*, or powers that be’.¹¹ However, while the term Regionalist Populism suggests that populism is a core ideology, I argue that the best term to use in order to compare two regionalist movements across two different time periods is Populist Regionalism. In this choice of semantics, I adopt and adapt Mudde’s preference for the term Populist Radical Right rather than Radical Right Populist due to the fact that ‘in Radical Right Populism, the primary term is populism, while “radical right” functions merely to describe the ideological emphasis of this specific form of populism. Populist Radical Right, on the other hand, refers to a populist form of the radical right.’¹²

I contend, therefore, that whereas the primary term in Regionalist Populism is populism, Populist Regionalism refers to a populist *form* of regionalism. This, therefore, is more in line with the theory of populism as a ‘thin-centred ideology’ inasmuch as it ‘does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies’ such as, in this case, regionalism.¹³

Mudde, who identified Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties as primarily, ‘nativist, authoritarian and populist’, categorized the Lega as a ‘borderline’ example of this group, due to the fact that ‘while populism has always been a core feature of the Lega...authoritarianism

⁹ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).

Duncan McDonnell ‘A weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord’, *Politics*, vol.26, no.2, 2006, 126-132 (127).

Daniele Albertazzi, ‘Addressing the people: A comparative study of the Lega Nord’s and Lega dei Ticinesi’s Political Rhetoric and Styles of Propaganda’, *Modern Italy*, vol.12, no.3, 2007, 327-347 (331-332).

¹⁰ Roberto Biorcio, ‘La Lega come attore politico: Dal Federalismo al Populismo Regionalista,’ in Renato Mannheimer (ed.), *La Lega Lombarda*, (Milan: Feltrinelli 1991) 34-82.

Roberto Biorcio, *La Padania Promessa*, (Milan: Il Saggiatore 1997).

¹¹ McDonnell, ‘A weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord’, 127. (author’s italics) Albertazzi, ‘Addressing the people: A comparative study of the Lega Nord’s and Lega dei Ticinesi’s Political Rhetoric and Styles of Propaganda’, 331-332.

¹² Mudde *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

Ben Stanley ‘The thin ideology of populism’, *Journal of Political ideologies*, vol.13, no.1, 2008, 95-110 (107).

and nativism have not.¹⁴ I argue, instead, that both the Lega's populism *and* nativism, represent a significant continuity with the political message of the MRAs. The remainder of this section defines the different components of populist regionalism.

Regionalism, refers to 'bottom up' political demands from a regional group.¹⁵ It denotes 'the aspirations and activism of the concerned inhabitants of a region, and can be applied to the pursuit of the specific interests of such a unit'.¹⁶ In this paper regionalism is recognised as a core ideology, to which the 'thin-centred' ideology of populism is attached.

Therefore, the key feature of populism in this paper is a view of society as separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'.¹⁷ Populists conflate all parties and politicians as a 'political class' or 'elite' that feigns opposition to distract the people from the fact that they 'are essentially all the same and working together'; populism claims, therefore, to be above the traditional left-right political divide.¹⁸ While, the people' as a concept 'is simply too broad to tell us anything substantial about the real nature of populist constituency',¹⁹ the notion of a 'single territory of the imagination' which Taggart calls the 'heartland' proves more useful.²⁰ When the heartland 'demands a single populace' and emphasizes 'the unity and the homogeneity of the imaginary residents', this results in nativism.²¹

Nativism is 'a combination of nationalism and xenophobia' and, thus, 'an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state'.²²

Nativism can also be the result of a combination of regionalism and xenophobia, if the region is viewed in exclusionary terms and involves a process of 'othering' which 'relies on an 'us-them' distinction'.²³ Different nativist parties 'target different 'enemies' on the basis of a broad variety of motivations and prejudices' ranging 'from the mobilization of socioeconomic

¹⁴ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 57.

¹⁵ Michael Keating, 'The Political Economy of Regionalism', in Michael Keating and John Loughlin (eds), *The Political Economy of Regionalism*, (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 17-40 (18).

¹⁶ Peter Wagstaff 'Regions, Nations, States'. In Peter Wagstaff (ed) *Regionalism in the European Union*, (Exeter: Intellect, 1999), 4-18 (6).

¹⁷ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 23.

¹⁸ Cas Mudde, 'Introduction to the Populist Radical Right', in Cas Mudde (ed.), *The populist Radical Right: A reader*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 22-35 (26).

¹⁹ Paul Taggart, *Populism*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.96.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.63.

anxieties to the appeal to racial prejudices.²⁴ The native ‘in-group’ is defined against a clearly and explicitly described ‘anti-figure’ or ‘out-group’.²⁵

While ‘nativism does not reduce parties to mere single-issue parties, such as the term anti-immigrant does’, anti-immigration can certainly play a central role in nativist discourse in terms of ‘othering’.²⁶ When the non-native is defined as ‘the enemy within the state but outside the nation’, in Western Europe, this group has been most commonly represented by ‘the immigrant community’.²⁷ Nativism is not only relevant for migrant ‘foreigners’...but also towards minoritized fellow citizens who may be recast as virtual or de facto ‘foreigners’ – indeed ‘enemies’ *within* the space of the nation state.’²⁸ A case in point ‘is the so-called ‘southerners’, who can be both immigrants and indigenous ethnic minorities’²⁹ Indeed, ‘various populist radical right parties identity ‘southerners’ as a key enemy within the state, but outside the nation.’³⁰ Nativism promises ‘to give power back to the people.’³¹ Not only should the native people be the nation’s exclusive inhabitants, but their ‘state should be ruled by (people of) their nation’.³² Indeed, ‘the tendency for populists to be explicit in excluding certain groups as not part of the real ‘people’ finds a strong echo in the conception of the heartland’.³³ A common slogan of ‘our own state for our own nation’, for example, ‘Italy for the Italians’ is central to an idea of the heartland.’³⁴

In terms of Populist Regionalism, therefore, regionalism acts as ‘the specific ideology behind targeting an ‘elite’ and calling upon a ‘people’ thus defining their ‘essence and orientation.’³⁵ Populist regionalists focus on how a political elite or regime is conspiring against the region to deprive it of its sovereignty; regionalism is ‘fused with an anti-regime discourse to defend the region against the political class’ or a set of others.³⁶ Populist

²⁴ Mudde, ‘Introduction to the Populist Radical Right’, 26.

Hans-Georg Betz, ‘Nativism across space and time’, *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol.23, no.4, 2017. 335-353, (347).

²⁵ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 64.

²⁶ Mudde, ‘Introduction to the Populist Radical Right’, 18-22.

²⁷ Ibid., 70.

²⁸ Nicholas De Genova, ‘The “native’s point of view” in the anthropology of migration’, *Anthropological Theory*, vol.16, no.2-3, 2016, 227-240 (p.228).

²⁹ Mudde, ‘Introduction to the Populist Radical Right’, 73.

³⁰ Ibid., 73.

³¹ Koen Abts and Stijn Van Kessel, ‘Populism’, in James.D.Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (second edition) (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 609-612 (609).

³² Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 139.

³³ Taggart, *Populism*, 96.

³⁴ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 139.

³⁵ Giorgios Katsambekis, ‘The Populist Surge in post-democratic times: Theoretical and political challenges’, *The Political Quarterly*, vol.88, no.2, 2017, 202-210 (205).

³⁶ Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism and the Italian Lega Nord*. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 88.

regionalists also act as the 'vox populi' and appeal to 'the people' in socio-economic term, depicting their regions as 'islands of prosperity that can be protected only by a radical type of ethnic 'populist' democracy, in which the principle of 'liberal productionism' is pitted against that of 'political democracy.'³⁷ Populist Regionalism involves, therefore, a juxtaposition of the 'hard-working nature' of the 'natives' of one part of the country with the 'parasitic and lazy' other half often represented by immigrants or 'southerners'.

Populist regionalists depict the hard-working and virtuous region as exploited by the political elites which in turn are giving preference to an internal or external 'other' and put forward their respective regionalist programmes as the best way to return popular sovereignty to the heartland. The notion of taking back control of the heartland is not only for the economic benefit of its citizens but also the construction of this heartland against a series of dangerous 'others' or 'non-natives'. Populist Regionalism, therefore, pits the region against a corrupt elite whilst also portraying the region as 'ethnic', thus raising 'impenetrable cultural barriers even against those who are willing to integrate into the national polity, because it links the concept of participatory citizenship to cultural roots'.³⁸

Populist regionalists claim to protect the 'homogenous identity and culture' of the region which is 'threatened by a series of 'others'.³⁹ Thus, populist regionalism, with its nativist element, is not antithetical to radical-right ideology.

Indeed, Populist Regionalism builds on the theory of 'nativist nationalism' which according to Zaslove 'provides the link' between anti-southernism and anti-immigration.'⁴⁰ Further to nativist nationalism, populist regionalism draws Spektorowski's study of the New Right which was 'an intellectual proto-fascist movement in France ... which shifted from ... nationalism to ethno-regionalism' and was used as 'an ideological tool for redefining the parameters of inclusion to the community'.⁴¹ The New Right viewed ethno-regionalism as conducive to an exclusionary ideology due to the fact that the movement's ideology envisioned a particular type of Europe of macro-regions which

sets an alternative productivist ideology against bourgeois individualism and liberal globalization [and] promotes ethnic diversity within a federation of

³⁷ Alberto Spektorowski, 'Ethnoregionalism: The intellectual new right and the Lega Nord', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, vol.2, no.3-4, 2003, 55-70 (63).

³⁸ Ibid., 58.

³⁹ McDonnell 'A weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord', 128.

⁴⁰ Zaslove, *The Reinvention of the European Radical right: Populism, Regionalism and the Lega Nord*, p.108.

⁴¹ Spektorowski, 'Ethnoregionalism: The intellectual new right and the Lega Nord', pp.56-57.

European ethnicities, banned to non-Europeans and to those considered to be non-productive Europeans.⁴²

Finally, the framework used in this article draws on Albertazzi's and McDonnell's definition of populism as 'a "thin-centred" ideology which pits a homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous others depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity and voice.'⁴³

However, the analysis in this article will demonstrate that, unlike the aforementioned frameworks, Populist Regionalism, with its components of regionalism, populism and nativism, allows for a more nuanced analysis of where regionalism and right-wing nativism overlap. It therefore, allows for a greater understanding of Radical Right parties with regionalist roots by taking into account the nativist discourse of its populist regionalist precursors. Indeed, the benefit of seeing populism as a thin-centred ideology is that this 'ideational' approach allows for an examination of 'populist forces across space and time'.⁴⁴ Prior to an analysis of the discourse of the populist forces in this paper, it is first necessary to establish a historical context.

Two waves of activism

Both the MRAs' and the Lega's regionalism and populism were influenced by their specific contexts. While space does not permit a comprehensive analysis of the changing Italian political economic and social backdrop between the 1950s and the 1990s/2000s, the following paragraphs act as a point of reference for the comparison between the respective discourses of the MRAs and the Lega in the case study which follows. This serves to reinforce my aim not only to highlight the similarities but also the differences between these movements' political messages.

The MRAs formed part of a 1950s wave of populism as 'a product of the post-1945 period and the transition between Fascism and the Republic (later to be known as the 'First Republic')' campaigning at a local level on a platform of lower taxes, anti-politics, anti-southernism and anti-centralism; all elements which would later be adapted by the Lega.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., p.61.

⁴³ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Populists in Power*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

⁴⁴ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Populism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 493-511 (493).

⁴⁵ Newth, 'The Movimento Autonomista Begrmasco and the Lega Nord', 6.

The MARP and the MAB were in many ways similar to other 1950s' populist movements such as *l'Uomo Qualunque* of Italy and *Poujadisme* of France, in their claims 'to incarnate the revolt of the small against the big' and espouse 'the cause of the small man, attacking big capital and the self-serving politicians who promoted it.'⁴⁶ Like *Qualunquismo* and *Poujadisme*, the MRAs positioned themselves against the entire political class, claiming to be 'neither on the right, nor on the left, nor on the centre' and instead appealing 'to the *honest people*...regardless of social condition, ideological conviction or political affiliation.'⁴⁷

What differentiated the MRAs from other 1950s' populist movements, however, was their regionalist activism and nativist discourse connected to post-war migration. The MRAs fielded candidates in municipal elections in 1956 to campaign for the activation of regional statutes, which although having been written into the Republican constitution of 1948, had remained inactive.⁴⁸ The region was presented as a way to stem migration from the South in the post-war period. Piedmont was the 'prime receiving region' of the 'more than 2 million people [who] left Italy's south ... in the two decades following WW2'.⁴⁹ However, southern Italians also migrated towards Lombardy and its provinces, such as Bergamo.⁵⁰ After electing councillors to communal and provincial councils, an attempt was made in 1958 to forge an alliance of regionalist movements called the MARPadania. However, the overall aim remained that of achieving regional autonomy sanctioned by the constitution and this alliance did not lead to any notion of a united Northern or *Padanian* identity like that promoted by the Lega.⁵¹ While the MRAs challenged the parties of the Republic and opposed inter-regional migration, they also advocated for national unity and their regionalist message did not share the anti-nation-state message central to the ideology of *legghismo*' which was connected instead to 1990s populism.⁵²

While the Lega's populism railed 'against the political class and the administrative bureaucracy and their control over fiscal policy,' this was tied in with a 'reaction against the

⁴⁶ Aurelien Mondon, *The Deep Roots of the Populist Reaction in Parliamentary Democracies: The French and Australian Cases as Perspectives*, PhD Thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 2011, 109-111.

James.G.Shields, *The Extreme Right in France: From Petain to Le Pen*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 70.

⁴⁷ Shields, *The Extreme Right in France: From Petain to Le Pen*, 80.

⁴⁸ 'Statute of Movimento per l'Autonomia Regionale Piemontese', 25 July 1955, Archivio di Stato Torino, Category.A3A. Folder: *Movimento per l'Autonomia Regionale Piemontese* Vol.2.

Anselmo Freddi, 'Il nostro programma', in Gruppo Autonomista Bergamaschi (eds) *Così Parlano gli autonomisti*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi, 1955) 8-9 (8).

⁴⁹ Enrica Capusotti 'Nordisti contro Sudisti Internal Migration and Racism in Turin, Europe: 1950s and 1960s, *Italian Culture*, vol. 28, no. 2, 121-138 (124-125).

⁵⁰ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy, 1943-1988*, (London: Penguin 1990), 223-226.

⁵¹ 'Il MARP diventa Padano per presentarsi alle elezioni', *La Stampa*, 24 February 1958.

⁵² Newth, 'The Movimento Autonomista Bergamasco and the Lega Nord', 6.

development of a heavily bureaucratized welfare state.’⁵³ The initial *leagues* - later to be aggregated into by Umberto Bossi in 1991 as the ‘Lega Nord’ - emerged in areas of north east (Veneto and Lombardy) and north west (Piedmont) Italy, whose economy was based predominantly on small, family owned businesses’.⁵⁴ They demanded ‘neo-liberal and autonomist’ policies to reduce fiscal pressure and reform a bureaucratized welfare state in the face of burgeoning state deficit.⁵⁵

Lega populism was later influenced by the fall of the Berlin Wall and ‘the collapse of many of the prevailing ...Cold War meta-narratives.’⁵⁶ In Italy, the end of the Cold War, the Tangentopoli corruption scandals in 1992 and subsequent electoral reform in 1993, constituted ‘a real electoral earthquake’, in that ‘all the old parties were either wiped out or emerged as much weakened’.⁵⁷ Leghismo ‘amplified the crisis’ by exploiting a 1990s’ populist discourse of perceived ‘corruption and collusion in established political parties’ using terms such as *mafia* to describe the political class and emphasise an alleged criminality of politicians.⁵⁸

In the face of a second wave of migration from abroad ‘at the beginning of the 1980s’ when ‘a significant number of non-European and east European immigrants’ reached Italy’s shores, the Lega claimed that ‘Italy was being transformed into a multicultural society against the will of its citizens by mass immigration from the Maghreb countries and (after 1989) Albania.’ Regionalism was, therefore, presented as guaranteeing Northern borders against migration.⁵⁹

By the time *leghismo* emerged, the regional statutes for which the MRAs had campaigned had been active for nearly a decade and the Lega’s regionalism aimed to fragment the state and weaken the Italian unity which its precursors had defended. Between 1992 and 1995, Bossi proposed the division of the peninsula into three ‘macro-regions.’⁶⁰

Spektorowski has argued that by promoting these macro-regions, the Lega and the New Right were ‘different, but complementary faces of ... sophisticated right-wing ethno-

⁵³ Hans Georg Betz, ‘Introduction’, in Hans G Betz and Stefan Immerfall (eds), *The New Politics of the Right*. (New York: St.Martin’s Press 1998), 1-11 (5).

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism’, 497.

⁵⁴ Michel Huyseune, *Modernity and Secession, The Social Sciences and Political Discourse of the Lega Nord in Italy*, (New York: Berghan Books 2006), 99.

⁵⁵ Ilvo Diamanti, *Il Male del Nord: Lega, localismo, secessione*, (Rome: Donzelli 1996), 38.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Donald Sassoon, ‘Tangentopoli or the democratization of corruption: considerations on the end of Italy’s First Republic’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol.1, no.1, 1995, 124-143 (128).

⁵⁸ Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto, *Lega & Padania*, (Bologna: Il Mulino 2012), 33.

Taggart, *Populism*, 75.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism’, 497.

⁵⁹ Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and its discontents 1980-2001*, (London: Penguin 2001), 62.

Anna Cento Bull and Mark Gilbert, *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question in Italian Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2001), 14.

⁶⁰ Umberto Bossi, *Vento dal Nord: La mia Lega, la mia vita*, (Milan: Sperling and Kupfer 1992), 151-170.

regionalist ideology'.⁶¹ However, in its early stages, in contrast to New Right arguments, 'the EU and globalization were allies' of the Lega Nord and Bossi believed 'that the Northeast as a region was already competing successfully in the global economy'.⁶² Unlike the New Right, Bossi used ethno-regionalism in the Lega's early stage to principally 'attack partyocracy, consociationalism and state welfarism' in order to challenge the 'country's prevalent form of state' and 'impose novel (unquestionably North-centric) solutions and policies'.⁶³

The Lega's subsequent secessionist Padania project between 1995 and 1999 saw the questioning of Italy as a nation and an attempt 'to construct (and invent) a' Padanian 'geography and a history'.⁶⁴ The nationalist and nativist discourse adopted in this period was not in line with New Right ethno-regionalism as the key objective of the Lega became the protection not of a region but a 'nation', 'the preservation of Padanian culture and identity from the powerful global forces arrayed against it – Fortress Padania'.⁶⁵

From 1999 secessionism was abandoned and the Lega's regionalist proposals fluctuated between devolution and federalism. Nevertheless, Padania remained part of the Lega's identity and was a key factor in the Lega's shift to becoming a member of the Radical Right "family" of political parties.⁶⁶

Case Study

Having established a populist regionalist framework and the necessary historical context, the following case study examines in three parts the continuities and discontinuities of populist regionalism between MRAs and the Lega, focusing in particular on narratives of exclusion.

Northern 'islands of prosperity', corrupt political elites and southern invasion.

Both the MRAs and the Lega accused the perceived elites in Rome of exploiting productive 'islands of prosperity' in order to favour southerners. However, the Lega also

⁶¹ Spectorowski, 'Ethnoregionalism: The intellectual new right and the Lega Nord', 68.

⁶² Anna Cento Bull, 'Collective identities: From the Politics of Inclusion to the Politics of Ethnicity and Difference', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, vol.2, no.3-4, 2003, 41-54 (p.47).

⁶³ Idem, 'Breaking up the post-war consensus: the ideology of the Lega Nord in the early 1990s', *The Italianist*, vol.31, no.1, 2011, pp.112-122, (p.113-113).

⁶⁴ Cento Bull and Gilbert *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question in Italian Politics*, 113.

Benito Giordano, 'A Place called Padania?: The Lega Nord and the political representation of Northern Italy', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, vol.6, no.3, 1999, 215-230 (217).

⁶⁵ Cento Bull and Gilbert, *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question*, 132.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 106.

radicalized these nativist claims in line with its 1990s populism in an attempt to counter what it portrayed as the south's hegemony over the Italian state.

In 1956, the MARP used a populist slogan of 'Torinesi! This may be your only chance to vote exclusively for our poor, mistreated, exploited Piedmont. We've had enough of politicians and bureaucrats!'⁶⁷ The MAB also stoked a populist discourse by stating that 'the first observation that one makes of the Italian parties is the similarity between them...instead of channeling opinions...they become instruments of propaganda.'⁶⁸ *Leghismo* echoed this message claiming that 'the ideologies of the centre, the left and the right' were 'unable to represent, the people's demands.'⁶⁹ Both waves of activism claimed the political elites in Rome were conspiring against the region. A major factor in this was a fiscal protest based around the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (Fund for the South) set up

in 1950 to assist the economic regeneration of the poorest regions of the country,[and] spent more than 1,000 billion lire during the first years of its existence on roads, electricity, housing, water supplies and other infrastructure works in the south, and over 8,000 billion lire between 1957 and 1975 on (for the most part failed) schemes to promote industrialization.⁷⁰

The Cassa, according to the MRAs, was a symbol of the South's passivity and 'of the North's generosity'⁷¹ The 1950s' autonomists stated, 'we pay every year 280 million to the state and receive less than 90 million...we are tired of maintaining funds intended for the South' and 'Lombardy sends 440 million per year to the state and receives no more than 140 million in return...We cannot industrialize the South at the cost of draining completely the resources of the North.'⁷² The Lega built upon these narratives in the 1990s, claiming that the state was 'responsible for an iniquitous fiscal policy that was harmful to the 'productive North'

⁶⁷ Michele Rosboch, 'L'autonomia regionale amministrativa non potrà dividere il popolo Italiano', *Piemonte Nuovo*, 23 March 1956.

⁶⁸ Angelo Meli, 'Il Vizio dello Stato genera vizio negli stessi partiti', in Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi (eds) *Così Parlano gli autonomisti*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi 1955), 44-46, (44).

⁶⁹ 'Brescia: Le proposte della Lega', *Lombardia Autonomista*, 11 January 1992.

⁷⁰ Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A history of Italy since 1796*, (London: Allen Lane 2007) 564.

⁷¹ Capusotti, 'Nordisti contro Sudisti Internal Migration and Racism in Turin, Europe: 1950s and 1960s', 7.

⁷² Electoral poster entitled: 'Piemontesi – paghiamo ogni anno', *Piemonte Nuovo* 6 December 1958.

Guido Calderoli, 'Il centralismo di Stato e il riscaldamento centrale', in Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi (eds), *Così parlano gli autonomisti*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi, 1955) 23-25 (21).

and advantageous to the 'parasitic' south' and that 'the generous distribution of wealth has not brought any real advantage to the South, because only work can truly create wealth.'⁷³

Migratory flows from South to North in the 1950s exacerbated anti-southernism. The MAB argued that taxation was 'made much worse' by 'the continuous influx of immigrants, that weighs heavily on our communal administration'.⁷⁴ The MARP also argued that Piedmont was the 'region which pays the largest quantity than any other in terms of taxes and [had a] continued influx...of southern elements and of other regions (around 3,000 per month)'.⁷⁵

The MRAs pursued a process of 'othering' towards southern Italians, as an 'immigrant community' within the state but outside the region.⁷⁶ The MARP's claim for the need of 'a new administration capable of making Turin great again and giving Piedmont back to the Piedmontese!'.⁷⁷ The MAB's slogan of 'Lombardy for the Lombards!' were later imitated by the Leagues with slogans from the Lega Lombarda such as 'I am Lombard, I vote Lombard' and from Piemont Autonomista of 'Piedmont for the Piedmontese'.⁷⁸ Such slogans were indicative of these movements' nativism.

The MRAs defined northerners against 'terroni' (a pejorative term for southern Italians). The MARP's electoral slogan from 1956, promising to 'Kick Naples out of Turin' ('Fuori Napoli da Torino') was cited as 'one of the main reasons' for its 'electoral success among the local middle classes' in Piedmont.⁷⁹ The MARP also stated that 'unfortunately...over 200,000 individuals have come from the South and have invaded every corner of the city'.⁸⁰ The MAB's electoral campaign in 1956 also presented migration as an invasion and a 'struggle for independence from Sicilians, Calabrese, Pugliese and Neapolitans'.⁸¹

⁷³ Percy Allum and Ilvo Diamanti, 'The autonomous leagues in the Veneto', in Carl Levy (ed.), *Italian Regionalism*, (Oxford: Berg 1996), 151-171 (152).

Umberto Bossi, *Il mio progetto. Discorsi sul federalismo e Padania*, (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer 1996), 150.

⁷⁴ Aldo Rizzi, 'Fra settentrione e meridione qualcosa bisogna fare', in Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi (eds), *Così Parlano gli autonomisti*, 16-18, (18).

⁷⁵ 'Notes written by the Turin police commissioner' 20 January 1957, Archivio di Stato Torino, Category A3A, Folder: *Movimento per l'Autonomia Regionale Piemontese*, Vol.2.

⁷⁶ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 73.

⁷⁷ Rosboch, 'L'autonomia regionale amministrativa non potrà dividere il popolo Italiano', 23 March 1956.

⁷⁸ Guido Calderoli, 'Lombardia ai Lombardi', in Guido Calderoli (ed) *Zibaldone autonomista d'un montanaro Bergamasco*, 1958, 78-80 (78).

Aldo Rizzi, 'Bergamo ai Bergamaschi', *Il Gazzettino*, 15 March 1955.

Electoral poster entitled 'Sono Lombardo, Voto Lombardo', *Lombardia Autonomista*, 21st May 1992.

Electoral poster entitled 'Piemont ai Piemontesi', *Piemont Autonomista – Alleanza Nord*, 24th May 1989.

⁷⁹ Capusotti, 'Nordisti contro Sudisti. Internal Migration and Racism in Turin, Europe: 1950s and 1960s', 8.

⁸⁰ 'Torino non può più assorbire altre forti masse di immigrati', *Piemonte Nuovo* 28th June, 1958.

⁸¹ 'La Battaglia dei terroni si farà', *La Notte*, 13th April 1956.

The MARP argued that ‘it is the duty of citizens to ask first for our children to be housed...and say *no* to invasion.’⁸² Similarly, the MAB questioned ‘is it really right for us Bergamascons, born in a productive and industrial region to see the best jobs systematically taken away from us?’⁸³ Early Lega programmes also included the demand that housing and jobs should be reserved for Lombards and the Piedmontese echoing the MARP’s campaign against migration from the South, lamenting that Turin was ‘the third southern city in Italy’.⁸⁴ Piedmontese *leghisti* argued that the ‘biblical style exodus’ from South to the North in the 1950s and 1960s threatened Piedmontese customs and identity.⁸⁵ and that ‘the South is stealing our jobs’.⁸⁶

Strongly linked to the protection of housing and jobs was a perceived colonization of bureaucratic posts in the North. In 1956 municipal elections, the ‘MAB became more identified with the expression of the discontent for the continued arrival of southern bureaucrats’ and argued that ‘local administrative offices should be run by a Lombard or Bergamascan.’⁸⁷ There were also claims that ‘in Bergamo in these past ten years there has been no Bergamascan judge...all of them have been *terroni* ... the same can be said for numerous other key jobs.’⁸⁸

The Lega continued this discourse, claiming that ‘Rome has transformed the North into a colony with excessive southern population.’⁸⁹ This perceived ‘degradation of Lombardy into a land of conquest’ meant northerners were ‘forced to put up with the choices of a political class in Italy...of a largely southern origin.’⁹⁰ Both Moioli and Cento Bull have observed that ‘hostility towards the ‘*terrone*’ as a public functionary’ formed a key part of the Lega’s anti-southern and ‘one of the main components of the Northern League’s anti-southern attitude is ‘the transfer of southern employees to public-service jobs in the North’.⁹¹

⁸² Rosboch, ‘L’autonomia regionale amministrativa non potrà dividere il popolo Italiano’, 23 March 1956. (My italics).

⁸³ Guido Trapletti, ‘L’autonomia locale nei diritti delle persone’, in Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi (eds) *Così parlano gli Autonomisti*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi 1955), 12-15 (14).

⁸⁴ ‘Il nostro statuto’ *Piemont Autonomista*, Aprile 1987.

‘Programma dell’Union Piemonteisa’, *Union Piemonteisa*, 15 December 1986.

‘Programma Politico’, *Lombardia Autonomista* September 1983.

⁸⁵ Michela Grosso, ‘Riusceremo a formare i Piemontesi di domani?’, *Piemont Autonomista* 24 July 1987.

⁸⁶ Maurizio Borsotti, ‘Il Sud ci ruba il lavoro’, *Piemont Autonomista*. October 1988.

⁸⁷ Rizzi, ‘Fra settentrione e meridione qualcosa bisogna fare’, 16.

Anselmo Freddi, ‘Sperano nei voti’, *La Notte*, 13 April 1956.

⁸⁸ Guido Calderoli, ‘Dieci anni di servitù bergamasca’ in Guido Calderoli (ed.), *Zibaldone Autonomista d’un Montanaro Bergamasco*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi 1958), 48-54 (48).

⁸⁹ ‘Federazione Autonomista Padano-Alpina’, *Lombardia Autonomista* 1983.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Vittorio Moioli, *Il tarlo delle leghe*, (Milan: Associazione culturale Antonio Gramsci, Edizioni Comedit 2000 1991), 228.

Cento Bull, ‘Ethnicity Racism and the Northern League’, 180.

Language was important in the MRAs nativist message. The MAB argued that ‘sending elementary teachers from the South to our mountain valleys is counter-productive...differences in needs, in customs and habits and way of life constitute an insurmountable barrier to academic life.’⁹² There were also claims that ‘many fathers have protested... that [their children] do not understand anything of what the “terrone” teacher tells them.’⁹³ In 1980s Lombardy and Piedmont ‘the autonomist leagues valued the specificity of regional dialect.’⁹⁴ The Lega Lombarda, in a manifesto entitled ‘Scuola coloniale basta!’ argued that ‘in our schools, we must speak our own language’ and that ‘our teachers must not remain unemployed to allow the employment of “others.”’⁹⁵

This section has built upon Cento Bull’s work on ethnicity and racism present in North Italian regionalism and the Lega by examining how ‘the diffused quasi racist attitudes of ... Northern Italians...found political expression and representation....in the 1950s and 1960s’ through the MRAs largely due to the fact that ‘immigration from the South to the North ...created tensions and ill-feelings among the “indigenous” population’.⁹⁶

However, while the Lega was able to make a breakthrough in national elections using this anti-southern discourse, the MRAs remained on the periphery. This can be explained through examining the context of ‘the fiscal crisis of the state and the corruption crisis enveloping the political class in the early 1990s which ‘provided the favourable terrain for the emergence of counter-hegemonic populist movements and parties’⁹⁷

The Lega’s anti-southernism was more radically counter-hegemonic than that of the MRAs in that the Lega portrayed the state as having been colonised by the South. In particular, the south was viewed as ‘a metaphor summing up all that is wrong with Italian society and politics’.⁹⁸ The Lega was able to offer a radically counter-hegemonic solution to the perceived southernization of the entire state.⁹⁹

The MRAs had never suggested as Bossi did that ‘the entire state apparatus had been southernized and has perpetuated a system based on favouritism’ through ‘a strategic

⁹² Tomasso Pacati, ‘Conosciamoci anzitutto’, Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi (eds) *Così parlano gli autonomisti*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomista Bergamaschi 1955), 19-23 (22).

⁹³ ‘Troppi maestri meridionali’, *La Notte*, 13th April. 1956.

⁹⁴ Roberto Biorcio, ‘La Padania Promessa: La storia, le idee e la logica d’azione della Lega Nord’, 43.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Anna Cento Bull, ‘Ethnicity, Racism and the Northern League’, in Carl Levy (ed.), *Italian Regionalism*. (Oxford: Berg 1996), 171-189 (172).

⁹⁷ Anna Cento Bull, ‘The role of memory in populist discourse’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol.50, no.3, 2016, 213-231 (220).

⁹⁸ Allum and Diamanti ‘The Autonomous Leagues in the Veneto’, 153.

⁹⁹ Cento Bull, ‘The role of memory in populist discourse’, 220.

infiltration' of southerners into 'political posts and posts of public order.'¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the Lega 'attempted to forge a connection between the importation of the mafia to the North and the predominance of the southerners in public administration'¹⁰¹ By focusing not only on the wasteful centralism of Rome, but also the image of a Mafia state, the Lega not only recycled MRA discourse but also adapted it to meet the 1990s' populist emphasis on corruption and criminality and a reaction against the heavily bureaucratized welfare state.¹⁰² The Lega argued that criminality and mafiosità had become the principle *raison d'être* of the Italian state. In this sense, the Lega's populist regionalism differed from that of the MRAs as it represented 'a popular struggle by excluded and subordinated groups against the dominant bloc' of the southernized state which was 'aimed at shifting the balance of power within the dominant bloc.'¹⁰³

From Fortress North to Fortress Padania

The Lega's secessionist strategy had two significant effects on populist regionalism and nativism. First, it led to the definition of an exclusionary heartland outside the borders of the Italian state. Second, it played a key role in the Lega's shift to the right, thus also marking a discontinuity with the MRAs which did not have an explicitly far-right identity. The creation of Padania meant that rather than excluding 'others' (both southern and foreign) from a *region* within the nation-state, Padania became the nation-state and thus the heartland in itself. To understand the significance of this, it should be noted that prior to secessionism, differences between the MRAs' and the Lega's vision of the heartland had been far more nuanced.

The MRAs' regionalist discourse emphasized that 'Italy will be united only when more ample and wide-ranging autonomies are granted to each region', thus not meaning to exclude them from the Italian heartland.¹⁰⁴ The MRAs argued that 'the contrast between North and

¹⁰⁰ Bossi, *Vento dal Nord*, 175.

¹⁰¹ Biorcio, 'La Padania Promessa: La storia, le idee e la logica d'azione della Lega Nord', 45.

'Statuto della Lega Autonomista Lombarda', *Lombardia Autonomista*, September 1983.

Maurizio Borsotti, 'Gli autonomisti contro la criminalità', *Piemont Autonomista*, 27 July 1988.

'Mai più Mafiosi in confine', *Piemont Autonomista* 10th December 1988.

¹⁰² Maurizio Borsotti, 'Le poltrone del Sud', *Piemont Autonomista*, 29 December 1989.

Idem, '2001: Montecitorio nelle mani del Sud', *Piemont Autonomista*, October 1988.

Carl Levy and Joseph Farrell, 'The Northern League: Conservative Revolution?' in Carl Levy, (ed.), *Italian Regionalism*, (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 131-151 (142).

¹⁰³ Cento Bull, 'The role of memory in populist discourse', 215.

¹⁰⁴ 'Lettere al Direttore - La polemica fra Nord e Sud', *Piemonte Nuovo*, 15 September 1956.

South will remain, until the government, politicians and public officials stop convincing themselves that Italy can be governed from the North and the South with the same laws'.¹⁰⁵

In a letter addressed to all southern migrants to Turin, the MARP in an attempt to distance himself from accusations of anti-southernism, in his address to southern migrants, stated, 'don't think that we don't want you as part of Italy!'.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the MAB encouraged greater 'fraternity between North and South' by arguing that 'reflecting...upon the divisions between North and South...encouraged greater solidarity and balance in the nation'.¹⁰⁷

The Lega's nativism, in its federalist phase, also did not exclude southerners from the Italian nation per se; the aim of the three macro-regions was individual management of three economies.¹⁰⁸ Bossi's call for southerners to 'find answers for themselves via self-government' can, thus, be seen as an echo of the MRAs' exclusionary vision of a northern heartland, but within the framework of the Italian state.¹⁰⁹ Until the declaration of Padania, there had been a certain level of continuity of the MRAs and the Lega's message of each region taking care of its own interests, whilst not explicitly excluding southerners from Italy.¹¹⁰

However, the creation of Padania led to a radicalization of this exclusionary heartland as, as it emphasized, 'the impossibility of keeping together, without coercion, a multi-ethnic state...in which Southerners represent the 'foreign' component: a state whose multiethnic character is determined by the presence of fellow Italians classified as non-Padani'.¹¹¹

The definition of fellow Italians as 'non-Padani' (non-Padanians) marks a discontinuity with the nativism of the MRAs. The Lega was not just arguing for the separation of two economic systems, but was demanding a separate state split on 'ethno-cultural lines'. Bossi argued that 'Padania's citizens are becoming ever more conscious of their identity' and that 'the break-up of the State is inevitable, and it is necessary, as soon as possible, to abandon any of the mild regionalist reforms and prepare with urgency, the institutions of a new Padanian nation'.¹¹²

A Padanian heartland meant the construction of new borders to stop the invasion of Others. The Lega's shift to becoming a party of the far-right, depended largely on its prior

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Roberto Codazza, 'Lettera diretta a chi viene dal Sud', *Piemonte Nuovo*, 15 October 1956.

¹⁰⁷ Pacati, 'Conosciamoci anzitutto', 22.

¹⁰⁸ Moioli, *Il Tarlo della lega*, 228.

¹⁰⁹ Umberto Bossi and Daniele Vimercati, *La Rivoluzione, La Lega: storia e idee*, (Milan: Sperling and Kupfer 1993), 155.

¹¹⁰ 'Lettere al Direttore - La polemica fra Nord e Sud' 15 September 1956.

¹¹¹ Eva Garau, *The Politics of national identity in Italy: Immigration and Italianità*, (London: Routledge 2015), 111.

¹¹² Umberto Bossi, *Il mio progetto, discorsi sul federalismo e Padania*, (Milan: Sperling and Kupfer 1996), 163.

racism and xenophobia towards both internal migration *and* foreign migration. Indeed, Garau has noted that ‘Southerners seem to have now been replaced by non-Italian immigrants in this rhetoric against a pluralistic state’, therefore, no longer constituting ‘the main concern of the Lega Nord today’.¹¹³

Racism and xenophobia against southerners were key ingredients of a nativism which had found political expression in the 1950s’ MRAs. However, the shift from MRA nativism to Lega racism can be explained in how the latter wave of activism portrayed Padania as a way of defending against a multi-cultural society. While the MRAs wanted southerners to ‘become more Italian’, no such nation-building project was afforded to foreign migration by the Lega which has instead ‘actively participated in the creation of an exclusionary Italian identity’ against migration from abroad.¹¹⁴

An analysis of Lega discourse against foreign migration in the late 1980s and 1990s reveals how the focus of the Other was moving towards migration from abroad even before the invention of Padania, while also holding key parallels with the MRAs’ nativist discourse. Just as MARP had highlighted cultural differences between Northerners and Southerners, a threat to Piedmontese culture and the overcrowding of the city, *Piemont Autonomista* stated in the 1980s that ‘we live in fear of this army of illegal immigrants of colour, with their colonising, rampant, invasion, irreconcilable with our customs and life.’¹¹⁵ Arguments that ‘jobs and houses should be reserved for those who belong to the country’ and that ‘if the “guests” do not adapt to our civilization...send them back to where they came from’, had also been used by the MRAs.¹¹⁶

The MRAs, referring to northerners and southerners living in the same region, had previously argued that ‘however hard they try, the government, will never be able to amalgamate men of such different *races*’ claiming that ‘whoever is from the North is always able to recognise a southerner at first glance, and vice versa.’¹¹⁷ Southerners were referred to as ‘foreigners’, and their migration to the North portrayed as a ‘genocide’ of native north Italians.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Garau, *The Politics of national identity in Italy: Immigration and Italianità*, 111.

¹¹⁴ Idem, *National Identity and Immigration: The Case of Italy*, 179.

¹¹⁵ Maurizio Borsotti, ‘L’opportunismo dei partiti, vu cumprà?!’, *Piemont Autonomista*, 27 July 1988.

¹¹⁶ Piero Molino, ‘Ma è razzismo o autodifesa?’, *Piemont Autonomista*, 30 September 1988.

Bossi, *Vento dal Nord*, 144.

¹¹⁷ ‘Lettere al Direttore - La polemica fra Nord e Sud’, 15 September 1956.

¹¹⁸ Guido Calderoli, ‘Da Bergamo. Genocidio o distruzione della gente dei monti’, in Guido Calderoli (ed). *Zibaldone Autonomista di un montanaro Bergamasco*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi 1958), 106-110.

While the claim to protect Italian, European and Christian values was never used by the MRAs in arguments against an invasion from the South, such articles echoed MRA discourse in attributing blame to the elites in Rome for allowing migration to take place representing a continuity in terms of nativist discourse. This was also evident in the Lega's conflation of Islamic Front extremists from Algeria in the 1990s, with the Islamic religion, thus portraying extremists such as the Islamic Front as the true face of Islam.¹¹⁹ The Lega repeated this accusation in a number of articles against foreign migrants in their publications, *Lombardia Autonomista* and *La Padania*.¹²⁰

While the racism which formed a key element of the Lega Nord's shift to the right, therefore had its roots in MRA nativist discourse, the vital point is that the MRAs had never spoken of the need to prevent a 'multi-racial society', something which was instead central to the Lega's populist regionalism. While anti-immigration and nativism has been a constant presence in both MRAs and Lega discourse, Padania intensified this discourse and linked it to the party's shift to becoming a party of the radical right, leading to the Lega's emphasis on immigrants from abroad.¹²¹ The Lega's idea of a populist heartland, unlike the MRAs, was linked to a new post-Cold War divide that pitted identity against multiculturalism¹²² and, therefore, related to the notion of transforming 'liberal democracy into an ethnocratic regime'.¹²³ Indeed, 'with the invention of Padania...the presence of immigrants was perceived...as carrying an inner cultural and ethnic difference absolutely incompatible with Northerners values.'¹²⁴

The Lega used Padania, to give 'supremacy to the interests of 'the people', defined in terms of a narrow conception of citizenship" and campaigned against 'racial and ethnic minorities who will not 'assimilate' into the desired culture'.¹²⁵

Idem, 'Il Bergamasco è maltrattato come Cittadino e più ancora come Contadino perfino nel dialetto' in Ibid, 191-199, (191).

¹¹⁹ 'L'islam in casa e Roma costruisce moschee', *Lombardia Autonomista*, 18 January 1992.

¹²⁰ Garau, *The Politics of national identity in Italy: Immigration and Italianità*, 165-180.

¹²¹ Hans Georg Betz and Carol Johnson, 'Against the current – stemming the tide. The nostalgic ideology of the contemporary populist right', in Cas Mudde (ed.), *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader*, (Abingdon: Routledge 2017), 109-127, (114).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 117.

¹²⁴ Garau, *National Identity and Immigration: The case of Italy*, 168.

¹²⁵ Betz and Johnson. 'Against the current – stemming the tide. The nostalgic ideology of the contemporary populist right', 117.

Stopping the invasion?

How did each wave of activism propose stopping the invasion of non-natives into the heartland? And how was a populist regionalist discourse framed to present stopping an invasion as beneficial for the non-natives as well as the native population?

Both MRAs argued that southerners should be taught to help themselves in their own regions, adopting a slogan of ‘aiutare sì’, mantenere no’ (let us help them, but not through handouts). With regards to the gap between the North and the South in economic terms, MAB posed the question of ‘what is the purpose of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno if it doesn’t manage to employ southerners in their regions and they continue to come to the North?’¹²⁶ Southerners were, therefore, encouraged to work to strengthen their own region: ‘you can only solve your own problems by staying in your own homes and fighting to obtain the right to administer yourselves, we will gladly help you as equals, without making you rely on handouts.’¹²⁷ The MRAs countered accusations of anti-southernism stating that ‘we are often accused of being anti-southern... simply because we want the full activation of the regions... we hope that in every other part of Italy, everybody else is working for their own region.’¹²⁸

This demonstrates a significant continuity between the MRAs’ and the Lega’s nativism. The Lega argued that a separate state of Padania would be of great benefit not just to the North but also the South as it would teach it fiscal responsibility.¹²⁹ After the abandonment of secessionism, the Lega continued to adapt the MRAs ‘aiutare sì mantenere no’ to become one of their ‘immutable principles’ of ‘aiutiamoli ad aiutarsi’ (let us help them help themselves) or ‘aiutiamoli a casa loro’ (let us help them in their own homes) to apply to foreign migrants.¹³⁰ Indeed Bossi’s claims that ‘a Senegalese is better off tending to his affairs in Senegal than in Brescia’ provides a significant parallel with the MRAs’ insistence that each Italian should work to improve their own region.¹³¹

While there are definite cross-overs in how stopping the invasion was framed by both waves of populist regionalism, an analysis of how the MRAs and the Lega proposed to limit migration also reveals discontinuities. The MRAs claimed - falsely - that the regional statutes

¹²⁶ Rizzi, ‘Fra settentrione e meridione, qualcosa bisogna fare’, 18.

¹²⁷ Codazza, ‘Lettera diretta a chi viene dal Sud’, 15 October 1956.

¹²⁸ Quaraglino Massara, ‘Chi ha mobilitato il Sud contro il Nord?’ *Piemonte Nuovo*, 15 February 1958

¹²⁹ ‘La Padania o il solito ombrello (rotto)’, *La Padania*, 29 March 1997.

Giancarlo Pagliarini, ‘Perchè la secessione fa bene anche al Sud’, *La Padania* 14th January 1997.

¹³⁰ Garau, *National Identity and Immigration: The case of Italy*, 179.

¹³¹ Dwayne Woods, ‘Pockets of resistance to globalization: the case of the Lega Nord’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol.43, no.2, 2009, 161-177, (173-174).

in the Constitution would provide a solution to ‘uncontrolled migration’ to their regions. The MAB stated that ‘defending the natural right of residence, for which nobody should have to be forced, if not for extreme and just motives, to abandon their place of birth’ was strongly linked to ‘the realisation of regional autonomy...as is allowed by article 117 of the Constitution.’¹³² The MAB also argued that ‘when regional autonomy is activated...it will no longer be seen necessary to emigrate to other regions’.¹³³ The MARP echoed this idea of regional autonomy sanctioned by the constitution placing limits on migration arguing that ‘regional government was indispensable for all the Italian regions, in ensuring a limit to migration from region to region’.¹³⁴ Suggestions were made to implement a fascist law of 1939 which had prohibited Italians from ‘transferring their residency to a major centre unless they already had a job there’.¹³⁵ The MARP argued that

the application of the 1939 law is not in contradiction with article 16 of the new constitution [it] could be applied effectively to prevent the movement of those who not having secured themselves a stable job and inevitably end up shoring up the ranks of delinquents, thieves, prostitutes and individuals dedicated to the criminal world.¹³⁶

The final words in this statement show how the MRAs linked immigration and crime to give added urgency to the need to stop the invasion. Another MARP exponent stated ‘some of the more weak and desperate of you, will maybe commit a criminal offence ... disturbing the order of the city.’¹³⁷ The MRAs did, however, recognize that limited migration was also an economic necessity and stated ‘when a city is vital for the nation...it would not be wise to impose unnecessary limits on the workforce’.¹³⁸

In contrast, the Lega, in its role in right-wing governing coalitions in the Second Italian Republic, amended immigration law to adapt it to the challenges that foreign migration posed to its heartland. The Bossi-Fini legislation of 2002 and the Security Package of 2009 allow significant comparison with MRA proposals. In terms of the Bossi-Fini legislation, the Lega

¹³²Anselmo Freddi, ‘Commento al Programma’, in Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi (eds), *Così Parlano gli autonomisti*, (Bergamo: Gruppo Autonomisti Bergamaschi, 1955) 8-11 (8).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁴ ‘Notes written by the Turin police commissioner’, 20th January 1957.

¹³⁵ Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A history of Italy since 1796*, 471.

¹³⁶ ‘Torino non può più assorbire altre forti masse di immigrati’, 28 June 1958.

¹³⁷ Codazza, ‘Lettera diretta a chi viene dal Sud’, 15 October 1956.

¹³⁸ ‘Notes written by the Turin police commissioner’, 20th January 1957.

argued that previous legislation on foreign migration – the ‘Martelli law’ (1989) and ‘Turco-Napolitano law’ (1998) – ‘gave too many rights to immigrants ... were too lenient on illegals, and they did not link employment with immigration.’¹³⁹ Therefore, the Bossi-Fini law ‘articulated itself in opposition to the previous laws in its attempt to create an even more rigid legal structure to contain immigration’.¹⁴⁰ This law essentially ‘linked employment with the ability to obtain a work permit or a visa’ making it only possible to obtain ‘a work permit if the applicant secures a job, a place of residence, and if the employer can guarantee return passage once the new arrival is not employed’.¹⁴¹ The immigrant would be ‘expected to find a new job, or return home when the work permit expired.’¹⁴² It should be noted that the Bossi-Fini law in purely legislative terms restates what already was established with the first law on foreign workers, from 4th December 1963, which the *Ufficio Provinciale di Lavoro* drafted on the basis of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) guidelines on foreign workers.¹⁴³ However, the language adopted by the centre-right coalition’s bill represented a profound change, maintaining ‘the public focus on the repressive and authoritarian aura of the legislation’ such as proposals ‘for the use of naval force against boats carrying immigrants’ and for ‘the collection of biometric data when immigrants applied for or renewed resident permits’.¹⁴⁴

Regarding the ‘security package’ of 2009, this was part of the Lega ‘championing a barrage of hard-line measures on immigration’.¹⁴⁵ Proposed by Roberto Maroni, a leading exponent of the Lega Nord, as Interior Minister in 2008 ‘and introduced in August 2009 as Law 94/ 2009... ‘the security package’ was designed explicitly to criminalize clandestine immigration, raise barriers to entry and facilitate the expulsion of illegal immigrants.’¹⁴⁶

Having established the measures laid out by each wave of activism, it is possible to note both continuities and discontinuities between the MRAs’ and the Lega’s attempts to stop the invasion. The Lega’s proposals that work permits depended on obtaining a job can be seen as being preceded by the policy recommended by MARP. The suggestion of the former fascist

¹³⁹ Andrej Zaslove, ‘Closing the door? The ideology and impact of radical right populism on immigration policy in Austria and Italy’ *Journal of political ideologies*, vol.9, no.1, 2004 99-118 (111).

¹⁴⁰ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The art of talking back in a destination culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2005), 151.

¹⁴¹ Zaslove. ‘Closing the door? The ideology and impact of radical right populism on immigration policy in Austria and Italy’, 111.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Luca Einaudi, *L’immigrazione senza politica*, Dall’unità a oggi, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007), 99.

¹⁴⁴ Andrew Geddes, ‘Il rombo dei cannoni? Immigration and the Centre-Right in Italy’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol.15, no.3, 349-366 (361).

¹⁴⁵ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, ‘The Lega Nord back in government’, *West European Politics*, vol.33, no.6, 2010, 1318-1340 (1326).

¹⁴⁶ Anna Cento Bull, ‘Addressing contradictory needs: the Lega Nord and Italian immigration policy’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol.44, no.5, 2010, 411-431 (420).

law working alongside the constitution would, in essence, also criminalise migration as proposed by the security package in 2009. Additional continuities are evident by the fact that, just as the MRAs had recognised that migration was necessary, ‘while the Lega has opposed immigration...at the same time the industrialists of the party’s north-eastern heartland have campaigned for larger visa quotas and more immigrant labour.’¹⁴⁷

Significant discontinuity, however, can be seen in the Lega’s emphasis on a *European* invasion as the Bossi-Fini law and the security package ‘catered to the artificial perception of a *European* invasion perpetrated by both documented and undocumented migrants’¹⁴⁸ Additionally, while the MRAs claimed that regional autonomy would tackled the causes of migration in that migration would no longer be necessary, on the contrary, the Bossi-Fini law ‘refused to confront the global phenomenon of migration and the causes which motivate it’.¹⁴⁹ This is due to the fact that the Lega claimed ‘migration ought to be temporary as it concerns the Italian economic present and not the Italian cultural future’.¹⁵⁰ Instead, the MRAs, did indeed concern themselves with both Italy’s economic *and* cultural future, arguing that Italy would be further benefitted by southerners working to improve their own region.

Populist regionalism: Understanding the connection between regionalism and radical right ideology.

By sustaining the theory of populism as a thin-centred ideology, and through comparative analysis of both primary and secondary sources, this paper has identified how two waves of regionalist activism contributed to a process of social exclusion in Lombardy and Piedmont. In doing so the paper has demonstrated the historical connection between populist regionalism and the radical right as many of the arguments used by the MRAs in the 1950s were reformulated and used against migrants from abroad from the 1980s onwards in the Lega’s journey to becoming a radical right party.

In portraying the perceived political elites in Rome as conspiring with the south to threaten the homogeneity and prosperity of the Northern community the MRAs provided a populist nativist framework which would later be exploited by the Lega. However, the Lega, by

¹⁴⁷ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, ‘The Lega Nord in the second Berlusconi government. In a league of its own’, *West European Politics*, vol.28, no.5, 2005, 952-972 (962).

¹⁴⁸ Parati, *Migration Italy: The art of talking back in a destination culture*, 151.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

claiming that the entire state had been southernized, could present anti-southernism as part of a radical counter-hegemonic project.

While Populist Regionalism in the 1950s, helped raise ‘impenetrable cultural barriers’ by ‘linking the concept of participatory citizenship to cultural roots’, Padania, with its new exclusive borders separate from the nation-state focused on new threats posed by a multi-cultural and multi-racial society.¹⁵¹ Indeed, the Lega’s legislation in the 2000s to stop the invasion of the heartland reflected a very different view to national and popular sovereignty to that of the MRAs.

The MRAs, to an extent, acted as precursors in their calls to limit the migration of ‘foreign’ southerners; however, their faith in the constitution to limit migration reflects a clear discontinuity with the Lega. For the MRAs, the constitutional statutes would help restore sovereignty to both North and South. If each region agreed to work towards the greater unity of Italy, there would be a permanent place for northerners and southerners in the Italian state. By contrast, as the Populist Regionalism of the Lega shifted increasingly to the right, there was no permanent place for foreign migrants within either a Padanian or Italian heartland.

My article, by identifying the MRAs and the Lega as connected by populist regionalism up to 1995, does something which cannot be done when viewing the Lega through the lens of New Right, nativist nationalism or indeed regionalist populism. Namely, it acts as an essential framework in understanding the links and cross-overs between a populist and nativist form of regionalism and a populist and nativist form of the radical right between two different periods of time. This framework avoids viewing populism as a core ideology takes into consideration how the populist and nativist arguments used against southern Italians in the 1950s by the MRAs were later adopted and adapted by the Lega, thus enabling a more nuanced analysis of the connections between two waves of regionalist activism.

In terms of future developments of the Lega, a thorough examination of how and to what extent Matteo Salvini’s Lega has drawn upon repertoires of exclusionary discourse developed by the preceding two waves of populist regionalism has been beyond the scope of this paper. However, my article has opened up avenues for such research on this most recent incarnation of the Lega to further develop an understanding of the continuing evolution of exclusionary regionalist ideology to radical right ideology.

¹⁵¹Spektorowski. ‘Ethnoregionalism: The intellectual new right and the Lega Nord’, 58.

